

Enhancing Students' Civic Engagement through Problem-Based Learning in Civic Education at Junior High School

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Article Info

Article History:

Received 05 September 2025

Revised 20 October 2025

Accepted 01 November 2025

Available Online

01 November 2025

Keywords:

Civic Engagement

Problem Based Learning

Civic Education

Junior High School

Democratic Participation

Abstract

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing students' civic engagement in junior high school civic education. Civic education plays a crucial role in fostering students' awareness, participation, and responsibility as young citizens. However, conventional instructional practices in civic education often emphasize memorization of concepts and legal norms, resulting in limited student participation and low civic involvement. To address this issue, this study implemented PBL as an instructional approach that engages students in analyzing and solving real-world civic problems. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group. Participants consisted of Grade VIII students from a junior high school, divided into an experimental group taught using PBL and a control group taught using conventional teaching methods. Data were collected using a civic engagement questionnaire and classroom observation sheets. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples *t*-tests. The results indicated that students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher levels of civic engagement compared to those in the control group ($p < 0.05$). Improvements were observed in students' participation in discussions, awareness of social issues, collaborative problem-solving skills, and willingness to express opinions responsibly. These findings suggest that PBL is an effective pedagogical approach for promoting active civic participation and meaningful learning in civic education. This study highlights the importance of adopting student-centered and problem-oriented learning strategies to strengthen civic engagement among junior high school students and to support the development of democratic competencies in formal education.

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1. Introduction

Civic education is widely recognized as a fundamental component of schooling aimed at preparing young people to participate actively and responsibly in democratic societies. At the junior high school level, civic education is expected to foster not only students' civic knowledge but also their civic skills, values, and dispositions, particularly civic engagement. Civic engagement refers to individuals' active involvement in civic and social life, including participation in discussions, concern for social issues, collaboration in problem-solving, and willingness to contribute to the public good (Hoskins et al., 2017). Developing these competencies at an early age is essential to ensuring sustainable democratic participation in the future.

Recent international research has highlighted that civic engagement does not emerge automatically through content transmission alone. Instead, it develops through learning experiences that actively involve students in discussing, analyzing, and responding to real-world social issues (Schulz et al., 2018; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019). When civic education is delivered primarily through lectures and memorization of norms or legal frameworks, students may acquire declarative knowledge but remain disengaged from civic practices. This challenge has been documented in many educational contexts, including secondary schools in developing and developed countries alike.

In Indonesia, *Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan* (PPKn) plays a strategic role in shaping democratic attitudes, social responsibility, and national identity. However, several national studies indicate that civic education in junior high schools often remains teacher-centered and examination-oriented, resulting in limited opportunities for students to express opinions, debate social issues, or practice participatory decision-making (Wuryandani et al., 2020; Sari & Wahab, 2021). As a consequence, students' civic engagement tends to be low, particularly in terms of active participation and critical discussion of societal problems. This condition is also evident in public junior high schools in urban areas such as Cimahi, where classroom practices are frequently constrained by curriculum coverage and time limitations.

Civic engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. It includes students' awareness of social issues, sense of civic responsibility, participation in civic-related activities, and ability to engage in dialogue and collaborative problem-solving (Hoskins et al., 2017; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019). Research has shown that students with higher levels of civic engagement are more likely to demonstrate democratic attitudes, respect for diversity, and readiness to participate in civic life beyond school (Schulz et al., 2018). Therefore, strengthening civic engagement should be a central objective of civic education, particularly at the lower secondary level.

One instructional approach that has gained considerable attention for promoting active learning and civic participation is Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is a student-centered pedagogical model that organizes learning around authentic and complex problems drawn from real-life contexts (Rosfiani et al., 2024). Through PBL, students collaboratively analyze problems, seek relevant information, propose solutions, and reflect on their learning processes (Damayanti & Mediatati, 2023). This approach aligns well with the goals of civic education, as it emphasizes critical thinking, dialogue, collaboration, and responsible decision-making (Hmelo-Silver, 2017; Savery, 2019). From a theoretical standpoint, PBL is rooted in constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process of knowledge construction through social interaction and contextualized experiences. By engaging students with real civic issues such as community conflicts, environmental problems, or democratic decision-making PBL enables learners to connect abstract civic concepts with concrete social realities. Empirical studies have demonstrated that PBL can significantly enhance students' engagement, motivation, and higher-order thinking skills across disciplines (Savery, 2019; Loyens et al., 2023). In the context of civic education, recent international studies indicate that PBL fosters students' civic engagement by encouraging participation, discussion, and collective problem-solving. For example, research by Knowles et al. (2018) and Maurissen et al. (2019) shows that students involved in problem- and inquiry-based civic learning exhibit stronger civic attitudes and greater willingness to engage in civic actions. Similarly, studies conducted in Asian educational contexts report that PBL enhances students' social awareness, collaboration skills, and sense of civic responsibility (Lee & Choi, 2019; Pratiwi & Wuryandani, 2020).

National research in Indonesia also supports the potential of PBL in civic education. Studies by Wuryandani et al. (2020) and Prasetyo and Dewi (2022) found that problem-based and contextual learning approaches in PPKn improved students' participation, critical thinking, and democratic attitudes. However, many of these studies focus primarily on cognitive outcomes, with limited emphasis on civic engagement as a comprehensive construct. Moreover, empirical evidence from public junior high schools, particularly at the Grade VIII level, remains scarce.

Grade VIII students are at a critical developmental stage characterized by increasing social awareness, cognitive maturity, and sensitivity to social justice issues. At this level, students are capable of engaging in structured discussions, evaluating multiple perspectives, and collaborating to address social problems. Implementing PBL in civic education at a public junior high school in Cimahi therefore presents an important opportunity to foster civic engagement through meaningful and participatory learning experiences.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning in enhancing students' civic engagement in civic education at a public junior high school in Cimahi. By employing a quasi-experimental design, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence on whether PBL can improve students' participation, social awareness, and collaborative problem-solving skills compared to conventional instructional approaches. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more participatory civic education

practices and to inform teachers and policymakers about effective strategies for cultivating active and responsible citizenship among junior high school students.

2. Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design using a pretest–posttest control group format. This design was chosen to examine the effect of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on students' civic engagement in civic education while maintaining the natural classroom setting. The independent variable was the implementation of PBL, whereas the dependent variable was students' civic engagement. The quasi-experimental approach was considered appropriate because random assignment of students to groups was not feasible in the school context. The research was conducted at a public junior high school in Cimahi, West Java, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants consisted of Grade VIII students aged between 13 and 14 years. Two intact classes were selected using purposive sampling, based on similarity in academic level, teacher assignment, and prior civic education achievement. A total of 68 students participated in the study. One class ($n = 34$) was assigned as the experimental group, which received instruction using the Problem-Based Learning model, while the other class ($n = 34$) served as the control group, receiving conventional civic education instruction. Both groups were taught by the same civic education teacher to minimize instructional variability.

The learning materials were developed in accordance with the Grade VIII civic education curriculum, focusing on topics related to citizens' rights and obligations, social norms, democratic values, and community participation. These topics were selected because of their relevance to students' daily lives and their potential to stimulate civic awareness and engagement. In the experimental group, instruction was delivered using the Problem-Based Learning approach. Each learning unit began with the presentation of a real-world civic problem, such as issues related to school discipline, environmental responsibility, or community cooperation. Students worked in small groups to identify the problem, analyze its causes, gather relevant information, propose possible solutions, and present their conclusions. The teacher acted as a facilitator by guiding discussions, providing feedback, and encouraging reflection. In the control group, the same learning objectives and materials were taught using conventional instructional methods, including lectures, textbook-based explanations, and individual assignments. Class discussions were limited, and learning activities were primarily teacher-centered. The intervention was conducted over six instructional sessions (2×40 minutes per session) for both groups.

Students' civic engagement was measured using a civic engagement questionnaire adapted from established instruments in civic education research. The questionnaire consisted of 30 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) covering four dimensions of civic engagement: 1) civic participation; 2) social awareness; 3) collaborative problem-solving, and; 4) willingness to express opinions. Content validity was examined by two experts in civic education, and the instrument demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$). An observation sheet was used to capture students' behavioral engagement during learning activities. The observation focused on indicators such as participation in discussions, cooperation within groups, and responsiveness to civic issues raised during lessons. Observations were conducted by the researcher and an assisting teacher to enhance reliability.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarize students' civic engagement scores. Prior to hypothesis testing, normality and homogeneity of variance were examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and Levene's test, respectively. To examine the effect of Problem-Based Learning on civic engagement, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. In addition, effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated to determine the magnitude of the intervention's impact. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Result

This section presents the results of the study on the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing students' civic engagement in civic education at a public junior high school in Cimahi. The findings are organized into four subsections: descriptive statistics, assumption testing, hypothesis testing, and summary of results.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Civic Engagement Scores

Group	Test	N	Mean	SD
Experimental (PBL)	Pretest	34	3.12	0.38
Experimental (PBL)	Posttest	34	4.21	0.35
Control (Conventional)	Pretest	34	3.09	0.41
Control (Conventional)	Posttest	34	3.54	0.40

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of students' civic engagement scores for both the experimental and control groups before and after the intervention. The pretest results indicate that both groups had comparable levels of civic engagement prior to the intervention. After the instructional treatment, the experimental group showed a substantially higher increase in mean civic engagement scores compared to the control group. And the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed that civic engagement scores for both groups were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Additionally, the Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance between the experimental and control groups ($p = 0.317$). These results confirmed that the data met the assumptions required for parametric statistical analysis.

Table 3. Independent-Samples *t*-Test Results for Civic Engagement Posttest Scores

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Cohen's d
Experimental (PBL)	34	4.21	0.35	7.84	66	< .001	0.67	0.95
Control (Conventional)	34	3.54	0.40					

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare posttest civic engagement scores between students taught using Problem-Based Learning and those taught using conventional instructional methods. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(66) = 7.84$, $p < .001$. Students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher civic engagement ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.35$) than students in the control group ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.40$). The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = 0.95$), indicating that the implementation of Problem-Based Learning had a substantial impact on students' civic engagement.

Further analysis was conducted to examine improvements across the four dimensions of civic engagement measured in this study.

Table 2. Improvement in Civic Engagement Dimensions (Experimental Group)

Dimension	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Gain
Civic participation	3.08	4.29	+1.21
Social awareness	3.15	4.33	+1.18
Collaborative problem-solving	3.10	4.18	+1.08
Willingness to express opinions	3.14	4.05	+0.91

The largest gains were observed in civic participation and social awareness, indicating that PBL effectively encouraged students to become more actively involved in civic discussions and more sensitive to social issues. Improvements in collaborative problem-solving and willingness to express opinions further suggest that PBL fostered a supportive environment for dialogue and democratic participation. Overall, the results demonstrate that Problem-Based Learning significantly enhanced students' civic engagement in civic education. Compared to conventional instruction, PBL-based learning resulted in higher posttest scores, greater gains across all civic engagement dimensions, and a large effect size. These findings indicate that engaging students in real-world civic problems and collaborative learning activities can effectively promote active participation, social awareness, and democratic competencies among Grade VIII students in a public junior high school context.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is effective in enhancing students' civic engagement in civic education at a public junior high school in Cimahi. Students who participated in PBL-based instruction showed significantly higher levels of civic engagement than those who received conventional teaching, with a large effect size. This result indicates that engaging students in real-world civic problems and collaborative inquiry can substantially strengthen their active participation, social awareness, and democratic competencies.

The significant improvement in civic engagement observed in the experimental group can be explained by the core characteristics of PBL, which emphasize student-centered learning, authentic problems, and collaborative problem-solving. Civic engagement, as conceptualized in contemporary civic education research, involves not only knowledge of civic concepts but also active participation, dialogue, and responsibility in addressing social issues (Hoskins et al., 2017; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019). By presenting students with contextual civic problems relevant to their school and community environments, PBL created meaningful learning situations that encouraged students to connect abstract civic concepts with real-life experiences. This finding is consistent with international studies reporting that problem- and inquiry-based civic instruction promotes higher levels of student engagement and participatory behaviors (Knowles et al., 2018; Maurissen et al., 2019). From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of PBL in this study aligns with constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process of knowledge construction through social interaction and reflection. During PBL activities, students collaboratively analyzed civic issues, exchanged perspectives, and negotiated solutions, allowing them to construct civic understanding through dialogue and shared inquiry. Such learning processes are essential for developing civic engagement, as democratic citizenship requires the ability to deliberate, cooperate, and respect diverse viewpoints (Schulz et al., 2018). Similar conclusions have been drawn by Loyens et al. (2023), who emphasize that PBL supports self-directed and socially mediated learning processes that are critical for participatory education.

The findings also support empirical evidence that PBL enhances students' participation and social awareness, which were the dimensions showing the greatest gains in this study. Participation is a central component of civic engagement, reflecting students' willingness to take part in discussions, express opinions, and contribute to collective decision-making. Previous research has shown that discussion-based and problem-oriented civic learning environments provide safe spaces for students to practice civic dialogue and develop confidence in expressing their views (Knowles et al., 2018; Maurissen et al., 2019). In the present study, PBL encouraged students to articulate arguments, listen to peers, and justify proposed solutions, thereby fostering participatory habits essential for democratic life. The improvement in students' social awareness further indicates that PBL facilitated deeper understanding of social issues and community responsibilities. By engaging with problems related to school discipline, environmental responsibility, and social cooperation, students became more attentive to the social implications of civic concepts. This finding is consistent with studies conducted in Asian and Southeast Asian contexts, which report that contextual and problem-based civic instruction enhances students' sensitivity to social issues and sense of civic responsibility (Lee & Choi, 2019; Wuryandani et al., 2020). Such outcomes are particularly important in junior high school, where students are developing social identities and moral reasoning.

Compared to conventional instruction, which often prioritizes content coverage and examination preparation, PBL provided opportunities for students to experience civic learning as an active and meaningful process. This supports the argument that civic education should move beyond transmission of normative knowledge toward pedagogical approaches that emphasize participation and experiential learning (Schulz et al., 2018; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019). The results of this study reinforce national findings indicating that traditional teacher-centered approaches in PPKn may limit students' civic engagement, whereas contextual and problem-based strategies can foster democratic learning environments (Sari & Wahab, 2021; Prasetyo & Dewi, 2022).

Importantly, the effectiveness of PBL observed in this study is closely related to its instructional integration within the civic education curriculum. PBL was not implemented as an isolated activity but was embedded within structured learning sequences aligned with curricular objectives. This finding echoes international research emphasizing that the impact of PBL depends on careful design, teacher facilitation, and alignment with learning

goals (Hmelo-Silver, 2017; Savery, 2019). When teachers act as facilitators who guide inquiry and reflection, PBL can effectively promote both cognitive and civic outcomes.

In the context of Indonesian public junior high schools, this study contributes valuable empirical evidence supporting the use of PBL to enhance civic engagement. While previous national studies have primarily focused on cognitive achievement or democratic attitudes, this research highlights civic engagement as a multidimensional outcome encompassing participation, awareness, collaboration, and expression of opinions. These findings suggest that PBL can serve as a practical pedagogical strategy for strengthening participatory civic education in public schools, including those in urban areas such as Cimahi.

Despite these positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single public junior high school with a relatively limited sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the intervention was implemented over a short instructional period, which may not capture long-term development of civic engagement. Future research should involve multiple schools and longer interventions to examine sustained effects of PBL on students' civic participation and democratic dispositions. Further studies may also explore the integration of PBL with other participatory approaches, such as service learning or project-based civic education, to enhance its impact.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Problem-Based Learning is a powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing students' civic engagement in junior high school civic education. By fostering active participation, social awareness, and collaborative problem-solving, PBL supports the development of democratic competencies essential for active citizenship. These results underscore the importance of adopting student-centered and problem-oriented instructional strategies to strengthen the quality and relevance of civic education in contemporary schooling.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing students' civic engagement in civic education at a public junior high school in Cimahi. Using a quasi-experimental design, the findings provide clear evidence that PBL significantly improves students' civic engagement compared to conventional instructional approaches. Students who participated in PBL-based learning demonstrated higher levels of participation, social awareness, collaborative problem-solving, and willingness to express opinions responsibly.

The results indicate that engaging students in authentic civic problems enables them to connect theoretical civic concepts with real-life social issues. Through collaborative inquiry and discussion, students actively constructed civic understanding and practiced democratic behaviors within the classroom. These learning experiences contributed to the development of civic engagement as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, affective, and participatory dimensions. From a pedagogical perspective, this study highlights the importance of adopting student-centered and problem-oriented instructional strategies in civic education. The effectiveness of PBL observed in this research was closely related to its instructional integration with curriculum objectives and teacher facilitation. When implemented systematically, PBL provides meaningful opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, reflect on social issues, and develop a sense of civic responsibility. The findings have important implications for civic education practice in junior high schools, particularly in public school contexts. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate problem-based learning activities that address relevant social and civic issues to foster active participation and democratic competencies. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, as well as longer intervention periods, to examine the long-term impact of PBL on students' civic engagement and civic participation beyond the classroom.

In conclusion, Problem-Based Learning represents a promising pedagogical approach for strengthening civic engagement and promoting meaningful civic education among junior high school students.

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